

## Trickster's Way

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# Coulrophobia and the Trickster

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# Coulrophobia & The Trickster

By Joseph Durwin

In broad daylight, on the morning of July 15, 2002, three men dressed as clowns entered Brannigan's Pub, in the center of Manchester (UK). They proceeded to tie up the shop's manager (who was technically still a trainee) and threaten him with a sawed-off shotgun and a ten-inch blade before exiting the establishment with what the press referred to as "a small amount of money." They then escaped in a white transit van driven by a fourth party, and were pursued by police through the center of Manchester. The clown gang got into three separate car crashes as they were chased, yet still managed to escape. (1,2)

"This was a highly organized team, who had obviously spent some time planning this robbery," said inspector Darren Shenton. All for such a small score, apparently. "The trainee manager who was threatened by the robbers has been left extremely shaken and traumatized..." (1)

I'll bet he was. Armed robbery can unnerve the best of us at times, and it would be particularly terrifying if the manager was one of the many people in the western world who seem to suffer from coulrophobia, which the Phobia Clinic™ defines as a "persistent, abnormal, and irrational fear of clowns"(3).

But, you might ask, are there really people who are afraid of clowns? Or is it just the latest fashion in neurosis, brought on by consumer inundation with the band ICP (Insane Clown Posse, for those of you who live deep in the forests of Montana), the Spawn comics and other mass-distribution vehicles? Most anybody these days can walk into the nearest Hot Topic™ or go to any of the dozens of internet sites to purchase their own "CAN'T SLEEP, CLOWNS WILL EAT ME™," T-shirt.

On closer examination, however, it seems that many people who suffer from this specific anxiety disorder are middle-aged adults, and one would think they'd have had their formative experiences prior to the above fads, and before Stephen King terrorized America with Pennywise The Dancing Clown in the novel IT and film by the same name.

"I'm not comfortable in any way looking at them..." says

Forest York, 38, parent of three. “It’s a real discomfort and a need to get out of that situation. Just a real irrational discomfort.” York says he remembers being scared by the Town Clown on the Captain Kangaroo show when he was a child. (4)

“I just can’t stand it [seeing a clown],” says Regina McCann, 28 year-old mother of two. “I stiffen up, sweat and get goose-bumps. (5)

The psychologists who have addressed this topic usually say that this form of phobia probably develops out of some traumatic incident in childhood that in some way associated with a clown.

**“Kids around two or so are very reactive to a familiar body type with an unfamiliar face,” according to Dr. Ronald Doctor, professor of psychology at California State University, Northridge.(5)**

This would seem to be a factor for some, like Lisa Weihlmuller, 45, of Arlington, who began fearing clowns around 6 or 7 while at the circus: “ A clown got right up in front of my face, and I could see his beard stubble underneath the clown makeup. He smelled bad and his eyes were weird... He had this smile painted on his face, but he was not smiling. He was yucky. Scary. Freaky. Weird.” (4)

The second factor, most of them say, which also accounts for those who have not had a circus-trip or birthday-party gone terribly wrong, is to be found in the representations of evil clowns in mass media and movies, such as those already mentioned.

**“Stephen King’s movie IT, which featured a demented, murderous clown named Penny- Wise, did for clowns what Psycho did for showers and what Jaws did for swimming in the ocean.” (5)**

Okay, but a couple differences come to mind. For one, there aren’t a ton of websites all over the net full of rants about how evil and awful and scary showers are (although that could be highly entertaining). And as for Jaws, C’mon now. In IT, Pennywise reaches up from the sewer and tears off the arm of little George Denbrough. Ok, that’s a pretty nasty thing. But sharks *actually* tear off people’s limbs, *in real life!* Sharks are an unequivocally real (albeit rare) danger; yet there is no vocal resistance against sharks equivalent to that which can be found

toward clowns.

How significant is this resistance? A search through Google for “coulrophobia” turns up about 1,860 links. A search for “Claustrophobia” turns up about 58,900; 82,000 for “Agoraphobia.” Right from the start, it becomes clear that these more common phobias are much more ingrained in the vocabulary. But when I searched “evil clowns” I came up with 2,820 links, and for “hate clowns”: 3,350. By comparison, a search for either “evil space” or “evil outdoors” for the agoraphobic folks, or “evil elevators” “evil closets” for the claustrophobics, turned up nothing. Not one single contextually relevant link. For “Evil sharks”? Slightly better, 194 links popped up, the majority of which appeared to be focusing on a popular PC game or Dr. **Evil**’s **sharks** with laser beams from the Austin Powers film.

It would seem that the concept of evil clowns and the widespread hostility it induces is a cultural phenomenon which transcends just the phobia alone. Did it arise out of the phobia or the phobia out of it? And if people got the phobia out of the movies, where did the movies get the idea from? Perhaps there are clues to the nature of this fear in their film depictions.

Besides *IT*, the major depictions of evil clowns in the last couple of decades have been in the *Spawn* comics, as mentioned previously, where one of the major characters is a demon manifested as a frightful clown; *Poltergeist*; *Killer Clowns from Outer Space*; *Clownhouse*; and *KillJoy*. It is interesting to note that in all of these except *Clownhouse*- where the villains are escaped convicts dressed as clowns- there is a connection between the clown and the supernatural, or the clown is some type of supernatural entity\*. I’d like to go back to *IT*, though, because I think it has elements which are illuminating. For one, it appears Stephen King wrote *IT* partly out his own life-long fear of clowns.

In *IT*, a monster who quite commonly manifests as a clown haunts the town of Derry, primarily focusing on harassing and killing young children. The police never obtained any leads on these murders or “disappearances.” The police and other adults could not see the clown -only young children could really perceive him. (6) As I will describe late, this is eerily close to something which actually occurred in the U.S. in the Spring of 1981, five years before the publication of *IT*.

We are left to question- why do so many find clowns so disturbing? Why are they associated with evil, and with the supernatural? Perhaps by examining the origin and context of clowning in world history, we can come closer to answering these intriguing questions.

### **The Culture of the Clown**

Most people are aware of the evolution of the modern clown from the court jesters which have existed in most kingdoms for thousands of years in places such as Egypt, China, and Europe. The jester is in a unique position, permitted to mock and criticize the king in areas where no other can. The English word clown first appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, usually as Cloyne, Cloine, or Clowne- derived from Colonus or Clod, denoting a farmer, rustic person, a country yokel. John Towsen writes:

**“Throughout history, the idea of the clown has been linked with The Fool. Fool is usually taken to refer to someone lacking common sense, if not totally devoid of reason- and encompasses a broad range of characters, including both the village idiot and the harmless eccentric...The Fool’s characteristic traits are very much those of ‘Natural Man...’ Unimpressed with sacred ceremonies or the power of rulers, he is liable to be openly blasphemous and defiant; uninhibited in sexual matters, he often delight in obscene humor.”**  
(7)

What not everyone might know is that there doesn’t have to be a court or a king for there to be a clown. Many aboriginal, tribal peoples have ritual clowning. In a survey of 136 societies around the world, at least 40 had ritual clowns (8). Ritual clowns were particularly important to many North American Indian groups, and the roles they fulfilled help to inform our understanding of the modern clown phenomenon. William Willeford, in his classic study *The Fool and His Sceptre*, points out:

**“Institutionalized clowning reached especially impressive heights of differentiation and importance in Central and North America. In the Plains many individuals were called, usually as a result of dreams or visions, to engage in ‘contrary behavior’ including reverse speech patterns and the widespread trick of plunging their hands into boiling water to take out meat, then splashing the water on their backs while complaining that it was cold. Sometimes the behavior was carried out solemnly, with the spectators enjoined not to laugh; more generally it took the form of clowning.”** (9)

Such behavior was naturally called contrary because it subverted the social norms and the perceived binary oppositions of nature, as in pretending that hot water is really cold. And these were not the only fundamentals and norms which the clowns mocked. They mocked sex, with acts of fake intercourse, transvestitism, and other “off-color” humor as well as scatological practices involving eating excrement and drinking urine, and thereby reversing the usual bodily processes (9, 10).

Adolf Bandelier described Pueblo celebrations where clowns masturbated, had intercourse, and even performed sodomy in front of the entire tribe (11).

They also mocked the gods. Clowns of the Jemez Pueblo would profane the offering of cornmeal by peppering the spectators with ash and sand. Among the Zuni, members of the Ne’Wekwe clown society would break taboo by joking with the gods in English and Spanish, and even take it so far as to rig up fake telephones to converse with Zuni heaven. (10, 12)

**“[This concept of]... burles-queing the sacred while supporting it is repeated in most North American Indian cultures. In the Navajo Night Chant, the clowns join directly in the masked dances, getting in the way of the holy dancers and even trying to usurp the leader’s function by giving signals to the other dancers before he can do so. These Navajo clowns also burlesque performances of magic, revealing the sleight-of-hand technique underlying the illusion...”**  
(7)

Such behavior was apparently not only tolerated, but “in the various tribal and larger cultural areas of North America clowning had magical functions of fertility, shamanism, curing, war and policing (9).” So, these feces-eating, blasphemous, and by all accounts sexually obscene individuals, were considered necessary and healthful. They were considered a kind of shaman. Among the Plains Ojibway, any illness which was diagnosed as being caused by the demonic intrusion was treated by the clowns through song, dance, and the shaking of rattles (12). This shows, among other things, a rather sophisticated understanding among these Indians of the role of depression in illness. It also helps to explain the universality of clowning. While not all ceremonial buffoons engage in shamanism or healing, the role of ridicule and comedy in maintaining social order should not be overlooked. Often, the lewd and over-exaggerated portrayal of unwanted behavior among the tribe-people causes sufficient embarrassment on the part of the offender that they will discontinue the negative behavior – thus eliminating the need for legal sanctions or other types of formal

censure seen in some societies.

**“Since laughter under the right circumstances is felt to be “good” and is in any case necessary, attempts are made to provoke it in jokes and ridiculous behavior. For the same reason, fools are singled out or single themselves out to provoke it by telling the jokes and engaging the ridiculous behavior. There is no intrinsic necessity for this role to become a fixed social role filled by a specific person...However this role does seem to make itself felt in the normal life of a social group and then to be filled by one person.” (9)**

Such a person, as Willeford has already noted, is called to this role usually by dreams or visions, similar to the call experienced by shamans, healers, and even priests in many organized religions. The theme of sexual deviance in clowns is also one shared with many other kinds of shamans (13). That they engaged in shamanic functions such as curing in some societies has been established. In fact, among the Canadian Dakota, the clown is believed to be the most powerful shaman, deriving his ability from the great guardian spirit “clown” (14). Enid Welsford also points out the perceived connection of this role to spirits:

**“The madman is not always regarded as an object of commiseration. On the contrary, there is a widespread notion which is not quite extinct that the lunatic is an awe-inspiring figure whose reason has ceased to function normally because he has become the mouthpiece of a spirit, or powers external to himself, and so he has access to hidden knowledge.” (15)**

Welsford connects the Fool to clairvoyance and divination as well as to madness and sainthood. Paranormal scholar George Hansen further demonstrates this connection between clowns, mystic saints, and paranormal power- and connects it with the archetype of the Trickster.

**“Clowns have many striking characteristics as well as links with Shamanism...Fools and Clowns are sub-classes of Tricksters and share most essential qualities, including their association with supernatural... Their connection with the paranormal is unmistakable.” (16)**

## **THE TRICKSTER**

The Trickster is an archetype, an aggregate of abstract properties

or characteristics, one which can be found in cultures worldwide. The first use of this term to denote a certain fundamental type was probably in an article by Daniel Brinton in an 1885 paper "The Chief God of the Algonkians, in his character as a cheat and a liar" (17). The trickster is represented by various mythological beings in different cultures: the Greek Hermes, Loki of the Norse, Coyote of the American Indian, Eshu-Elegba in West Africa, and the Indonesian Kanjil are a few examples. The literature on such figures highlights certain qualities which are shared by many Trickster figures. Not all of these qualities display all of these qualities, but Jungian thought holds that as more properties of the archetype align, the archetype will get stronger and more will tend to manifest.

By analyzing one of the more well-known Trickster figures, Hermes, many of these traits become more obvious. Firstly, he is a skillful liar and a thief. Hermes is associated with boundaries.(18) Hermes literally means "he of the stone heap"; in Greece, stone heaps are used to mark property boundaries. He is a messenger god, traveling Olympus, Earth, and the Underworld- or, in psychoanalytic terms, from the higher mind of intellect and ideas, the ego, and the collective unconscious mind. Hermes is sometimes seen in the role of psychopomp, accompanying souls to the realm of death. (19,20)

He seems to stand in between his tow more recognizable half-brothers, Apollo- representing order and structure- and Dionysus's ecstatic, orgiastic excess. Greek mythology portrays Hermes as serving in the capacity of midwife at the birth of Dionysus, and being given the power of prophecy by Apollo, the ability to interpret signs. He is associated with divination, luck, coincidence, and synchronicity (19, 20). Finally, Hermes is also known for his sexual trickery and unrestrained sexuality (18, 21).

The fundamental qualities which emerge from the cross-cultural literature on Trickster figures include:

- practicing of Deception- deceit is one of the most integral aspects;
- they tend to be unrestrained and uninhibited sexually;
- they are disruptive and destabilizing to society, tending to break taboos;
- they have anti-structural personalities- they are marginal figures living on the boundaries of



society, solitary, usually bachelors  
-they practice magic, perform occult rites or have  
some type of contact with supernatural beings.

Tricksters tend to govern transition, introduce paradoxes and blur boundaries. Hansen is right to point out and emphasize the relationship of clowns to the trickster archetype. The Hindu clown figure Viduska, a character found frequently in Sanskrit drama, exemplifies many of these tendencies toward anti-structure and role inversion. The *Natyasastra* describes Viduska as coming from the highest caste, but speaks in the language of the lowest, Prakrit. His clothing and behavior are similarly backward, irrational and uninhibited (22). Through inverted speech, illogical actions, mimicry of spirits and animals, and ludicrous acrobatic stunts, clowns perform functions attributed to Tricksters in mythology, blurring boundaries, toying with social and sexual rules, and mixing the obscene with the sacred.

We have seen how in many traditional cultures, such as among the various American Indian groups, clowning has significant associations and ties to supernatural and paranormal elements, and to the archetype of the trickster, aspects of which, as George Hansen demonstrates in his book on the subject, manifest repeatedly in a wide range of Paranormal areas, from mediums to UFOs to laboratory-based PSI research

But while these notions are widespread in other cultures, the average American is not privy to such information. So why does this association still exist in popular culture? What bridge of events might exist between this ancient conception and the unconscious impulses of our own modern, largely secular and materialistic society?

### **SEND IN THE CLOWNS**

In the modern circus clown tradition, there seems to be an unmistakable tint of class humor. The recreating public would watch hobo clowns, with their shabby, ill-fitting clothes, their comically unshaven faces and alcoholic red noses, as they underwent a series of misfortunes in all their endeavors. A certain amount of guilt about the condition of the underprivileged must have been assuaged by seeing how these disadvantages tramps contributed to their own suffering by their bumbling, and yet these forlorn men always seemed basically

happy with this state of affairs.

### WEARY WILLIE

The preeminent tramp clown alter ego Weary Willie epitomized the eternally optimistic loser-victim. Kelly first began to perform as Willie in 1933. He achieved great success, touring Europe and performing before royalty, and after joining the Ringling brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus became the only clown ever to be permitted to perform while other acts were in progress.

Perhaps even more interesting than the role Weary Willie played in the history of clowning is the role the character took on in the life of Emmet Kelly, and in the Kelly family. In 1950, Warner Bros. offered Emmet Kelly the role of a killer clown in *The Fat Man*, about a circus clown who murders three people (so the theme does go back a bit farther than the 80's- probably a lot further: think of the knife-wielding maniac in *Pagliaci*). But Kelly was dissuaded from portraying Willie as a killer.

“Willie seemed to be pleading with me...He was lying in his trunk up in the Roosevelt Hotel, and while it may seem that all there was to Willie was a threadbare suit, a putty nose, some greasepaint, a busted derby and a pair of big, flapping shoes, I knew Willie had a heart, too. We were one and the same and I felt like I'd be a heel if I sold him out and made a real bum of him even in the crazy land of make-believe.” (23)

This was, apparently, not the only occasion when Kelly seemed to identify with Willie as a distinct individual. His wife, Eva, eventually divorced Kelly ostensibly because of his obsession with Willie; she claimed that he dressed up as Willie on occasion when they had sex on the assumption that Willie needed sex too. (24)

In 1960, his son Emmet Kelly Jr, then 40, began performing as his own version of Weary Willie. In 1964, he went on the road with the Willie act, despite the pleas of his wife Dorothy, who eventually divorced him, saying in the proceedings that Willie had taken over the personality of her husband. This did not significantly slow down his rise- he took the lovable hobo character on to even greater heights of fame, and he is considered by many to be the greatest pantomime circus clown

in history. (24)

Meanwhile, Emmet Kelly Sr. encouraged his son's work, and continued to work as Willie himself. When, at 74, he was asked why he continued to do the clown act despite his age, he said "I need to keep Willie alive." (25)

Not long after Emmet Kelly Jr. went on the road with Willie, his son, Paul Anthony Kelly, lost a leg in a train accident. When Emmet Jr. heard of the accident he came home, but after a brief visit departed, saying "Willie's got itchy feet." (24) After high school, Paul Kelly went on tour with his father as his prop boss. In 1977 the then twenty-year-old Paul served some time in prison. While there he converted to Catholicism.

"It was there one night, while sleeping, that Willie came to him in a dream. His father would soon retire, and Willie told him, *'Don't let me die.'* He awoke in the morning determined to be the third Weary Willie and started calling himself **Emmet Kelly III**, a name Willie could relate to." (24)

In March 1978, the youngest Kelly clown performer moved to Oceanside, CA, where he lived with a friend Janie Creel. Creel later described Kelly as having two personalities, and she described how during one of his acts, he would seem to actually become his grandfather. "Sometimes I felt as though Willie is taking over my body," Paul Kelly once said. "Just as he did my father and grandfather." (24) A few months later Kelly had moved into his own two-bedroom flat, where the split in his personality seemed to grow more severe. The side of him that identified most strongly with Weary Willie was also the side of him that seemed mean, that was drinking heavily, using drugs, and frequently engaging in homosexual sex.

On November 26, Oceanside Police Department arrested Kelly for the murder of Brent David Bailey and Henry Kuizenga, both homosexuals whom Kelly had engaged in sexual acts with. Kelly told police that he had been using a great deal of acid, cocaine, marijuana, amphetamines, and drinking, and that he had had an accomplice- who was in fact to blame for the drug use and the slayings.

He named someone named "Willie" as his accomplice.

Dr. Walter Griswold, his court appointed psychiatrist, eventually figured out that Willie was not a separate human being and

diagnosed him as having a split personality, but that he was not psychotic. He testified in San Diego superior court that Kelly had said Willie had initially tried to smother Bailey, 22, but when that failed Willie asked him to club Bailey to death. Dr. Michael Lozano then testified that Kelly told him that he had only struck Henry Kuizenga, 67, once, and then Willie hit him 15 more times. They had been performing oral sex on one another when allegedly Kuizenga attempted to force him to have anal sex.

“Emmet Kelly III said he spent many long nights asking himself what he could have done to prevent this catastrophe, but concluded the wrong man was in jail. Weary Willie deserted him when he needed him the most. Thinking about it all the time could drive a man crazy, he said.” (24)

On Sep. 16, 1980, Kelly was sentenced to two twenty-five year sentences. Emmet Kelly Sr. had already died the year before, in 1979. As he was exiting the courtroom a reporter asked him to describe Kuizenga’s reaction as he was dying. Kelly replied “He didn’t die laughing.” (26)

A relative of Paul Kelly’s (who currently works as a clown, though not Willie), points out that Paul “had psychological problems stemming from a train amputating his leg at the age of 9, compounded by years of drug abuse,” and that while “there are instances of unsavory individuals who happened to be clowns, ‘character flaws’ in individuals can be applied to any vocation...” (27)

He is certainly right about both of those facts, and it is not my intention to suggest that people who perform as clowns have disproportionately any more tendency to violence than anyone else. It is likely that the opposite is true. Later in this paper, I will also discuss how media coverage of crimes committed by people who work as clowns tend to over-emphasize the clown aspect even when it is irrelevant.

That notwithstanding, I present the Kelly case because it presents several aspects which are germane to this paper, and it is fertile ground for Trickster attributes. Deviant and uninhibited sexuality, (sodomy, role-playing and the like) crop up throughout the Weary Willie story. The handicapped, drug addicted Paul Kelly is a marginal, liminal personality. All three generations of Emmet Kelly’s seemed to be eccentric, boundary-crossing loners. And while no source on the evolution of Weary

Willie explicitly mentions the idea of *possession*, this theme seems to dance all around the edges of the story. It is therefore not totally unfair to dub the Paul Kelly affair a “killer clown” incident, for cultural purposes, because Kelly himself named Weary Willie as the perpetrator. Several of the aspects of this affair are repeated in a much better known series of “clown murders” in the same era.

## POGO

In any discussion about when clowns go bad, the name John Wayne Gacy inevitably gets mentioned. In a case often cited by coulrophobics, Gacy was arrested and convicted for the crimes of sodomizing and killing at least 33 young men and boys in and around Chicago between 1975 and 1978. (28) What should be made clear, as it is an often repeated error, is that *Gacy at no time worked as a professional clown*. He did, however, perform on a voluntary basis, as “Pogo” or “Patches” at children’s parties and hospitals. He later produced a great deal of artwork on the clown theme.

In Gacy can be found some familiar Trickster traits. First and foremost, he was a fundamentally deceitful creature. Killer Clown, written by Terry Sullivan and Peter Maicken, repeatedly depict him as a chronic liar (28). Charles Nemo, who interviewed Gacy several times in prison, confirms his overall picture: “...he was a habitual liar. He steadfastly denied any guilt during our early visits and was quite convincing in many of his claims, always presenting himself as a victim of some kind or another.” (29)

And Arthur Hartman, Chief Forensic Psychologist at Cook County Court, reports:

**“[Gacy is] ...very egocentric and narcissistic with a basically anti-social, exploitive personality. One reflection of this is his development of a technique of ‘conning’ or misleading others in his business and personal dealings.” (28, 30)**

Although Gacy was not inherently an outcast in the sense that Paul Kelly was, and was in fact a successful businessman and a “pillar of the community,” involved in many organizations and activities (of which clowning was a minor, but often cited one) – he nonetheless maintained an anti-structural, disruptive, and

boundary crossing personality. Although married, he had by the mid 70's ceased to have a sexual relationship with his wife, preferring boys. His sexual relationships were a gruesome tapestry of kidnap, bondage, forced sodomy and other sadistic acts, and the way he talked about sex tended to be equally obscene and confrontational.

“He was crude and brutal about his bisexuality and other matters, and enjoyed trying to shock people that he thought might disapprove of his preference for boys and young men to satisfy his sexual appetites.” (29)

The image of a killer hiding in a clown suit has become permanently etched into the mass conception of the Gacy killings, through a tabloid images and made-for-TV movies. One of the key books on Gacy, as mentioned above, is called *Killer Clown*. Almost any short bio that can be found on John Wayne Gacy (and there are hundreds on the internet) mention something about him working as a clown, while only a rare few mention his main occupation, as a contractor. The poster-cover of the new film about the events leading up to his arrest, *Gacy*, shows him in full clown attire. His clowning also features heavily in the 80's made-for-TV-movie *To Catch a Killer*.

What exactly about that element of his life makes his deeds any more horrifying in the public mind?

Scanning through media coverage of other incidents, two of which from the past year, I noticed that articles involving arrests of clowns featured their occupation prominently in the headline or byline, even though it may have had no relevance to the crime they were arrested for. It is as if the image of a dishonest, unsavory character somehow evokes more terror and revulsion if they are in whiteface. As if “Indecent Accountant” or “Locksmith jailed for assault” lacked a certain mystique possessed by the clown-turned-villain. (See Part II)

Perhaps it is a natural, parental feeling in society. A certain wariness- after all, clowns are people who are wearing disguises- masks, for all intents and purposes. ***They wear masks and they have access to children.*** We are left to wonder what goes on behind the mask. After the coverage of the Gacy killings, many parents probably experienced an undercurrent of fear and doubt about the clowns that they encountered. In 1981, that fear seems to have crystallized into something more overt.

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## Sidenote: The Fells Acres Scandal

*I have intentionally omitted any consideration in this expose the alleged “evil clown” misdoings of Gerald Amirault and the Fells Acres scandal in Malden, MA in 1984. Gerald Amirault was accused and imprisoned based on accusations that, among other things, he dressed as a clown, molested, and “ritually abused” a number of children at the daycare his wife ran.*

*Anyone so inclined may survey the extensive coverage and body of information on this affair. This case seems to me to be one of the few examples of a relatively clear-cut case of mass hysteria. Unlike many of the events and phenomena that are superficially explained away as mass hysteria or mass hallucination, in this case the entirety of the witness testimony was obtained under leading interrogation and extreme pressure upon the children involved to produce a particular scenario. Having studied the relevant information on the case, I am of the opinion that Gerald Amirault is a man wrongly accused – another victim of the 1980’s media obsession with satanic cults and “ritual abuse” scandals, paired with a prevalent ignorance of the concept of repressed memory.*

*That said, I think the case raises significant questions- not only the social question of the ability of the judicial system to keep up with modern society in the face of ongoing (and sometimes misguided) scientific theory, but also whether some of the other clown goings-on in the late 70’s /early 80’s, as well as some of the more ancient aspects of clowning discussed in this paper, may have fed into this frenzy somehow.*

*In a previous paper, I discussed the witchcraft trial which occurred in Salem, pointing out that while deception, hallucination, and false memories almost certainly all played some role in what occurred there, that in times of duress and liminality it is more than plausible that individuals and societies may often grasp a hold of universal, archetypal images and concepts- that in fact there is significant data to support this idea. (30.5a)*

*Looking at from this perspective, it is interesting to note that clowns are near the top of the list of images which arise in hypnotically-induced false memories of ritual abuse, and are*



*common motifs of early childhood fear in general. (30.5b, 30.5c)*

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### THE PENNYWISE GANG

Some strange clown activity was going on in the Spring of 1981, either in the often bizarre and confusing space-time parameters of the American city streets, or in the far more mysterious and less-well understood jungle of the American mind.

In early May, police precincts received numerous reports of clowns bothering children all over the Boston area. City-wide bulletins were issued by police seeking a man allegedly dressed in a clown suit from the waist up but otherwise naked, reportedly driving a black van in the Franklin Park area of Roxbury on May 6. He was also repeatedly seen near an elementary school in Jamaica Plain (31, 32).

The day before, police received a report of two men in clown suits attempting to use candy to lure children into “an older model black van with ladders on the side, a broken headlight and no hubcaps” (32). One is tempted to speculate, quite logically, that these men likely were not professional clowns but had merely obtained costumes. After all, if they were real clowns, there would probably have been more of them, in a much smaller car.

These were apparently not the first incidents of their kind. The May 7 Boston Globe coverage states: “Various reports about one or two men wearing clown outfits and driving a black van have been called in to authorities throughout the Greater Boston area for the past few weeks” (32). Initially, this was taken very seriously. Memos warning of clown harassment flurried throughout the school district.

“It has been brought to the attention of the police department and the district office that adults dressed as clowns have been bothering children [traveling] to and from school... Please advise students that they must stay away from strangers, especially ones dressed as clowns.” (32)

Over the course of weeks, it appears that police received reports, besides those already mentioned from Brookline, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain, from Canton, Somerville, East Boston,



Charlestown, Cambridge, Everett, and Randolph (31, 33). Police seemed to have taken these reports fairly seriously for the first weeks- various legitimate clowns on their way to parties or to send “clown-a-grams” were stopped and questioned. But police investigate by following leads, and leads were not forthcoming in these cases. Upon examination, police in several districts were unable to obtain eye-witness testimony from any adults. In fact, most of the reports of clown mischief came from children aged 5 to 7.

**“We’ve had rumors, but nothing substantiated,” said Cambridge Police Captain Alan Hughes, on May 8 or 9. “Some schools in Cambridge were in a panic two or three weeks ago. It’s died down now...A woman in Jefferson Park called to say she’d seen a clown and we sent a car up there. Then she said, “Maybe I was imagining it.” (34)**

**Officer O’Toole, a spokesman for the Boston Police, was quoted as saying:**

**“No adult or police officer has ever seen a clown. We’ve had calls saying there was a clown. We’ve had calls saying that there was a clown at a certain intersection and we happened to have police cars sitting there, and the officers saw nothing. We’ve had over 20 calls on 911. When the officers get there, no one tells them anything.”**

Police were similarly stymied in Stephen King’s IT.

So what was really going on in Boston? Rumor, perpetuated into mass hysteria? If so, it was widespread, as social worker and anthropological researcher Loren Coleman discovered. At the same time that police were scratching their heads in Boston, fifty miles south in Providence, Rhode Island, social workers were getting reports of men dressed as clowns disturbing children. (31, 35)

Was this an organized hoax? A prank by a couple of guys in a van? If so, it was to grow more sinister, and it would not remain confined to the east coast. On May 22, reports of a clown with a yellow van wielding a knife came from six different elementary schools. Police received dozens of similar reports throughout the day, both in Kansas City, Kansas and in K.C. Missouri (31, 35).

Latanya Johnson, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader at Fairfax Elementary school in

K.C. recalls:

**“He was by the fence and ran down through the big yard when some of the kids ran over there. He ran toward a yellow van. He was dressed in a black shirt with the devil on the front. He had two candy canes down each side of his pants.” (31)**

Reports of similar incidents cropped up in Omaha, Denver, Pittsburgh, and Arlington Heights (31, 35). These were not “repressed memory” images of clowns that were prompted out of students of a single day care, as in the Fells Acre scandal. These were spontaneous, self-reported encounters from children from all over the country, independent of each other and of news coverage (The Boston Globe did not even report on the clown scare until May 7, toward the end of the Boston wave). If it were hoaxsters, it graduated from the level of a simple prank to that of a well-oiled conspiracy, a rare thing. Despite all the complaints and reports, no one was ever apprehended, and no solid leads ever developed.

Loren Coleman sees other similarities between these clowns and a very different set of tricksters, the type of improbable and unverified characters which have continuously which have been continuously reported and existed in our lore throughout history. The kind of beings studied by Charles Fort and John Keel, elusive and perhaps only semi-material in their reality.

**“Perhaps these caped entities and phantom clowns have something to tell us. Certainly the monk-like and checker-shirted characters mentioned so often in the occult and contactee literature have become almost too commonplace and familiar... the denizens of the netherworld apparently have had to dream up a new nightmare that would shock us.” (31)**

Can there be a connection between these clowns and the robber clowns in Manchester in 2001, who evaded capture despite three auto accidents in their escape? One can only speculate. Either way, these publicized incidents are seen as vindication by many coulrophobes, whose phobias tend to manifest in ways which reflect their probably origin.

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Coulrophobia Pt.2:“CAN’T SLEEP,CLOWNS WILL EAT ME-

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From accounts of those who suffer from coulrophobia, it becomes evident that the torment they undergo has become a real and substantial phenomena which transcends the simple mass appeal the theme of the “evil clown” has in the horror genre- although the associations reiterated in such works probably doesn’t help any, especially now that there are even children’s books which have picked up the meme of the sinister clown (36, 37). The Phobia Clinic indicates that “It can cause panic attacks and keep people apart from loved ones and business associates. Symptoms regularly include shortness of breath, rapid breathing, irregular heartbeat, sweating, nausea, and overall feelings of dread...”(3).

Phobias operate as a kind of circuit for replaying conditioned fears. Fears arise from the human mind initially as a kind of protective mechanism. In fact, some phobias may actually constitute a kind of adaptive advantage for humans. A Swedish study demonstrated experimentally that subjects who had a pre-existing phobia of snakes or spiders were more able to spot the objects of their fears out of a background of distractions than were those without phobia (38). This is a case of emotion driving attention for survival purposes, to distinguish potentially dangerous objects out from non-dangerous stimuli. Many phobias may begin this way, as a simple reaction to negative stimuli, then develop and intensify as people attach more and more negative feelings to the stimuli, as a means of conditioning themselves to avoid further negative experiences.

How might the phobic reaction of these peoples to clowns serve some protective function? What is it about clowns that they might need to feel protected from?

“They’re social outlaws...” says Benjamin Proctor, 25, director for a N.Y. software company. “Clowns scare the bejesus out of me... because they’re playing this character, it’s as if they’re authorized to do things ordinary people can’t do.” (5)

Similarly telling accounts of the fear can be found in internet posts on the numerous anti-clown websites. “My hatred of clowns began when I was 5 years old. I was at a circus, and a clown came up to me and said, “Would you like to see the monkey I have in my box? Well, of course I did, so I said yes. When I looked into the box, there was no monkey...only a

mirror.” (6)

This seems vaguely reminiscent of the mysticism and revelatory humor of the native shamanic clown, albeit diluted from the extreme profanity and taboo-violating antics of those more ancient traditional tricksters. In here essay Path of the Sacred Clown, Peggy Andreas notes: “Sacred clowns function as the eyes of the Trickster in this world: mirrors in which we see our folly as well as our resilience.” (39)

Eric Idle voices a similar revulsion to these archetypal qualities: “Clowns are grotesquely painted, horrifying, mad people who come lurching toward us, threatening us, involving us... ***They know no boundaries*** [emphasis added]...They scare us because they are most like us; they are adults who behave like children.” (40)

It is likely because of this ancient tendency of clowns to fail to recognize established boundaries which leads to the marginalization of clowning in our society, and the reason why the fear of clowns- especially clowns with associations to the supernatural- persists for many.

As Hansen (16) points out, the importance of Trickster tales is downgraded in more formal, bureaucratic state-level societies such as ours, as are shamans and anyone who directly engages the “supernatural.” This is part of an ongoing sociological process, first pointed out by the pioneer of sociology Max Webber (and largely ignored by modern sociologists), the rationalization of the world, the tendency to push all things mysterious to the margins as far as they will go. The rationalization- or disenchantment- of the world depends heavily on demystification of the unknown; it clings frantically to Aristotelian logic, which excludes the ambiguous middle, separating categorically into either/or absolute states, and creating strong binary oppositions. And so the awe-inspiring , magically-charged holy obscenity which is the Fool or Contrary is reduced to the everyday novelty entertainer, with his squirting flower and balloon animals.

Nonetheless, in movies, books, and in the phobias of many, certain archetypal qualities of the sacred clown are half-remembered. At the edges of our conscious mind, we fear the coming of such enigmatic shamanic figures, with their hostility to established order and religious authority, their rejection of social and sexual norms, their blurring of boundaries.

Apparitions such as those that haunted many Americans in 1981 unnerve us, because they mock the holes in our conception of the universe, our notions of safety and security, and all the other frail certainties of our time.

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